

Bride Brown's Thanks to Army, 20 Years Later

By ELISABETH WITTENBERG

If you can stand just one more 40th anniversary this year, join me in a toast to Operation Cupid, the U.S. Army's mammoth post-World War II bride transport. From May 1945 to June 1946, some 60,000 war brides, including me, were ferried across the Atlantic, to be greeted in New York with beribboned docks and enormous banners reading, presumably as a sign of good sportsmanship, "Welcome Victors!"

I almost believe that the conversion from the pride of the Cunard Line to a floating nursery was the last straw that forced the Queen Mary into retirement. When I saw her in Long Beach, Calif., last year, tied to a pier and going nowhere, I was sure I could see the scars from the makeshift cots and smell the sour odor of seasick babies below deck.

Most of the young women and children who crowded the rails of the Queen to get their first glimpse of New York when we docked were full of apprehension and already homesick. So was I. After all, I was on my way to a reunion with the stranger I had married after three dates.

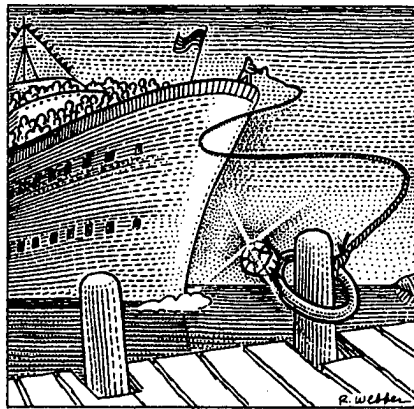
England was a long way away in those days. At least 24 hours on a plane, if you could ever scrape up enough money for a plane ticket, which seemed unlikely. Another week on a ship, for almost all those brides, still pale from their battle with *mal de mer*, couldn't even be contemplated.

In those first quiet 15 minutes, as New York took shape out of the early morning mist, more than 2,000 women suddenly knew that they had cut themselves off from their roots. They would have to adapt to a new life with only that soldier they had married against everybody's advice, to help them, protect them and sustain them. The fear in that dawn was almost palpable.

Since this was the Army's show, we disembarked in GI fashion, by name and number. The husbands, in civvies now, were lined up to receive the spoils of war they had brought back. In a scene that

could have been choreographed for a Hollywood production, the right husband appeared at the right moment at the entry of a maze built out of sawhorses all along the pier, when the bride's name was called. Since I was at the end of the alphabet, I watched for hours. Not one man vaulted those sawhorses to get there quicker. They were as frightened as we were.

But there was method in the Army's thoroughness. If my corporal hadn't been



the only man in that maze at the time, I might have walked right by him without recognizing him. Clothes not only make the man, they hide him too. But then he smiled, and I knew I had come home. If ever I were going to have a home in this strange country, its foundation would be built on that smile.

It's strange how close England has moved in the past 40 years, and how routinely one goes there. But this year my GI and I are going back on a leisurely sentimental journey. We've booked at the place we spent the last night of our honeymoon, Brown's Hotel, just off Piccadilly.

That last night was a stroke of luck. Both our leaves had been extended by 24 hours, so we promised ourselves a glorious night in London on the spur of the moment. But wartime London was not a city where you could get a decent hotel room on the

spur of the moment, particularly not an American soldier in uniform and a nurse with a hardly used wedding ring. We were turned down by every snooty hotel clerk in the West End.

Brown's came to mind because I knew the night clerk. Otherwise we would never have considered it. It was the epitome of old-money elegance in London. That's where the landed gentry stayed if they came to town and didn't care to open up the town house. It didn't need glamour, it had tradition. It also happened to have a room for us. And what a room! We got the bridal suite. Two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a drawing room large enough to accommodate the whole bridal party and a foyer, where presumably the personal maid could wait, to help the bride out of her finery. It was magnificent.

The next morning they brought our early morning tea on a silver platter and set our breakfast on white linen on the table in the drawing room. By that time we were thinking about escaping through the window, because we knew we didn't have enough money between us to pay for this "bed and breakfast."

But as we checked out, a miracle happened. The day manager, in cutaway and striped pants, handed us the bill and said: "It was an honor to have you stay with us, sir. I hope you will be very happy." The bill was for two pounds.

Whatever the difference between that bill and the bill this year will be, it will be worth it. After all, Brown's could be the only institution still around that might remember that wartime marriages were not supposed to last, but took a flier on one, anyhow.

The only private institution, that is. The U.S. Army did too. Here's to "Operation Cupid." My husband and I thank you, our children thank you, our grandchild thanks you and so on through the platoon.

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